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Part Two: Political, Diplomatic and Military Issues

The Power Structure in Vietnam after the Japanese *Coup De Force* and the “Power Vacuum” in the August Revolution

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1. “Power Vacuum” Theory in the study of the August Revolution in Vietnam

During the last 25 years, the issue of a “power vacuum” has been one of the important topics among the researchers both in Vietnam and abroad discussing the political process of the August 1945 Revolution. The concept was suggested by the Norwegian historian Stein Tønnesson in his PhD dissertation and then in his book published in 1991 in Oslo with the title *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945—Roosevelt, Hồ Chí Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War*. In this work, Tønnesson explains the “power vacuum” as follows: “The power vacuum can be better described as the absence of the French and Allies, the procrastination of the Japanese in maintaining their rule until the coming of the Allies, and the impotency of local officials and their authorities in realizing their own rights.”¹

This was the general situation of Indochina as a whole, including Vietnam, and also the general situation of most Southeast Asian countries (except for the Philippines and Thailand) after the Japanese Emperor officially offered unconditional surrender to the Allied countries on August 15th 1945. By then, the former colonial powers (the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Malaya and Burma, and the French in Indochina) had been vanquished or overthrown by the Japanese. Meanwhile the Allied forces had yet to arrive to disarm the Japanese soldiers. The former colonial masters were unable to return. Meanwhile, the Japanese forces (if they were intact) were depressed and demoralized. Pro-Japanese governments also fell into distress and were unable to maintain order.

This general situation is called a “power vacuum” by Tønnesson. According to him, in Vietnam it was this factor that helped the Việt Minh to take power easily. Nevertheless, in his study Tønnesson states: “While attributing crucial important to the power vacuum of August 1945 in explaining the August Revolution, this book has not argued that the revolution was ‘accidental’, ‘fortuitous’ or happened by ‘chance,’”² But in his work, he also raises such questions as “Who brought the Việt Minh to power in the August Revolution?” and even claims that “by creating the power vacuum the great powers pulled

¹ Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945—Roosevelt, Hồ Chí Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (Oslo: PRIO, 1991), p. 6

² *Ibid.*, p. 412.

the carpet out from under the existing state and thus ‘invited’ the Việt Minh to capture power.”³

In fact, Stein Tønnesson is not the first scholar to suggest the idea of a “power vacuum” in the context of the August Revolution in Vietnam. Before him, such scholars as William J. Duiker, Huỳnh Kim Khánh, Vũ Ngự Chiêu and King C. Chen referred to a similar idea. Duiker was the first to conceptualize the existence of a “political vacuum.” He wrote:

The August Revolution was so obviously an extraordinary achievement that it is important to keep in mind that a number of fortuitous circumstance contributed in no small measure to the Communist victory. The rapid disintegration of government authority in both urban and rural areas, coupled with the delayed arrival of Allied occupation forces after surrender of Japan, created a political vacuum at levers of power...⁴

Although recognizing the existence of a “political vacuum” and favorable “fortuitous circumstances” of the August Revolution, Duiker resolutely and clearly stated:

Yet the objective conditions alone do not make a revolution, and it is to the credit of the Communists that they were able to grasp the opportunity so enticingly offered at the end of the Pacific War. In other colonial societies, the vacuum might have been filled by non-Communist nationalism. But in Vietnam, the nationalists were unable to rise to the challenge [...] Only the ICP possessed the sense of timing and the understanding of the strategic nuances of the situation to rise to the occasion. The final point is crucial.”⁵

In his work published in 1982, Huỳnh Kim Khánh also mentioned the “political vacuum” that according to him occurred right after the Japanese *coup de force*. Based on a thorough analysis of the role of subjective and objective factors, he remarked: “In retrospect, historical fortuitous and revolutionary ability played equally important roles in the victory of the Vietnamese Communism.”⁶ Even Vũ Ngự Chiêu, an Overseas Vietnamese scholar who openly questions the role of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and the Việt Minh in the August Revolution, had to admit: “The Việt Minh’s triumph in August 1945 was a phenomenon in which both ‘favorable situation’ and the ICP’s leader’s ability to exploit these favorable factors were decisive.”⁷

Thus, a number of scholars in the West have introduced the idea of a “political vacuum” in Vietnam, especially after the Japanese surrender. According to them, this vacuum was accidentally created due

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 355, 415.

⁴ William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

⁶ Huỳnh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 334.

⁷ Vũ Ngự Chiêu, “Political and Social Change in Vietnam between 1940–1946” (Ph.D dissertation, University of Wisconsin/Madison, 1984), p. 438.

to the combination and interaction of some objective factors, and their result was a favorable context for the victory of the Việt Minh. However, almost all of these scholars, after having made thorough and in-depth analyses of the actual political developments in Vietnam, have agreed on the importance of both subjective and objective factors. The most decisive subjective factor was the role and leadership played by the ICP.

2. Did a “Political Vacuum” Really Exist?

So what does “power vacuum” really mean? Is it possible to confirm that there was such a “vacuum” in Vietnam from August 15 to September 2, 1945? According to Tønnesson, “power” here refers to only the ruling power. Thus, “power vacuum” merely implies the absence of a ruling power. Even this interpretation, however, is not sufficient to describe the historical reality of Vietnam of that time. At this point, although the power of the French colonialists had been eliminated by the Japanese on March 9, 1945, as the Allied forces had not stepped in to demilitarize the Japanese, the structure of government in Vietnam was still dominated by two forces, namely the Japanese army and the Trần Trọng Kim Cabinet.

Regarding the Japanese army, although the Emperor’s declaration of surrender made them profoundly demoralized and uprooted, they were far from completely disrupted, weakened or neutralized. At that time, the number of fully-armed troops exceeded 90,000 and they were well-known for *having never lost any battle* since the war had begun. Although mentally in crisis, the Japanese armed forces were nevertheless well disciplined and did not give up their position as the ruling power. There is clear evidence for this point:

- After the Japanese Emperor had surrendered, in the face of a possible overthrow of the Cabinet of Trần Trọng Kim and Emperor Bảo Đại by the revolutionary forces, the Japanese still made them an offer: “The Japanese army are still responsible for maintaining the order until the Allies come and replace us” and if the Vietnamese government openly asks for our favor, the Japanese army shall take up their job.” However, the situation was so hopeless that Bảo Đại and Kim rejected this proposal.⁸
- In Thái Nguyên, on August 16th 1945, the National Liberation Committee deployed their best troops to make a joint-attack against the Japanese with the support of the OSS “Deer Team” (Office of Strategic Services) led by Allison Thomas. However, after several days the Japanese army had not been wiped out or defeated. Only after the revolution had gained victory in Hanoi and the Japanese army in Thái Nguyên was ordered to cease their fighting did they accept to negotiate and transfer power to the revolutionary forces.
- In Hanoi, during the General Uprising to seize power, the Japanese refused to surrender the Bank

⁸ Trần Trọng Kim, *Một cơn gió bụi* (Sàigòn: Vinh Sơn, 1969), pp. 93–94. See also David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995).

of Indochina. The revolutionary forces were unable to take control of this bank so they had to negotiate and cooperate with the Japanese to guard it. Meanwhile, the attack on the Security Barracks met great difficulty and had to be delayed as the Japanese sent their tanks to intervene. It was not until the leadership of the Revolutionary Military Committee successfully negotiated with them and the tanks were ordered to withdraw, that the attack succeeded.⁹

These events prove that the Imperial army consisting of more than 90,000 regular troops in Vietnam at that time was still a formidable power, thus there was no “power vacuum” as proposed by Stein Tønnesson.

Having been aware of the situation, during its leadership of the uprising to seize power in most provinces, especially in large cities, the Việt Minh focused most of its efforts on how to neutralize the Japanese and prevent their intervention. In Hanoi, Saigon and many other areas, leaders of the ICP and the Việt Minh successfully carried on their brave, creative and skillful negotiations with the local Japanese military leadership and successfully neutralized those forces. The overthrow of the government was thus quick and calm, without bloody conflicts.

This diplomatic struggle of the Việt Minh should be seen as a form of power struggle and part of the General Uprising to seize power, greatly contributing to the success of the August Revolution. Of course, no one could have negotiated with empty hands. The Party and the Việt Minh were able to succeed in this effort thanks to the strong and massive support of the revolutionary forces that the Party had been consistently developing since the 1930s, especially since the formation of the Việt Minh in May 1941. It should be noted that in the latter half of August 1945, the Việt Minh were not the only force trying to seize the power given other powers who also wanted to seize this opportunity to leave their mark, including pro-Japanese forces such as the Phục quốc, the Cao Đài and the Đại Việt Quốc gia Liên minh. All these forces also tried to persuade the Japanese army to give them power and weapons. So, why did the Japanese not choose them, but decide to negotiate only with the Việt Minh? The Kempeitai were certainly not naïve or blind. They understood clearly that only the Việt Minh had the upper hand, being backed up by massive popular support. This was the main reason why the diplomatic effort by Việt Minh was successful.

The second existing power in Vietnam after the Japanese Emperor conceded was the Trần Trọng Kim Cabinet. It was widely known that this government was vulnerable, decayed and deeply in crisis following the Japanese surrender. However, as a part of the ruling power structure at that moment, this government did not voluntarily give up its ruling position. In Hanoi, on August 17, the Federation of Civil Servants even held a meeting to support the Kim government. Thanks to its creative plan and timing, the Revolutionary Military Committee managed to mobilize the masses to this meeting, took it over and transformed it into a massive parade to endorse the Việt Minh. Yet the next day, as a repre-

⁹ Lê Trọng Nghĩa, “Các Ủy ban nhân dân cách mạng ra mắt ở Hà Nội sau Khởi nghĩa Cách mạng tháng Tám,” in 19-8: *Cách mạng là sáng tạo* (Hà Nội: Hội Khoa học Lịch sử Việt Nam, 1995), pp. 87–94.

sentative of the Kim Cabinet, Minister Hoàng Xuân Hãn came to 101 Gambetta (now Trần Hưng Đạo Street) to try and persuade the representative of the Committee to delay the revolution, arguing that the Việt Minh should “take control of rural areas, while our Government continues to manage the big cities so that we have legitimacy to talk with the Allies...”¹⁰ At the same time, on August 21, when the nationwide liberation movement led by the Việt Minh was in full swing, the National United Front—an association of pro-Japanese organizations and sects in Cochinchina, held a formal meeting in Saigon with the participation of half a million people to celebrate the return of Cochinchina to Vietnam, but its main purpose was to support Kim and welcome the newly appointed governor Nguyễn Văn Sâm.

It could be said that this pro-Japanese puppet government was not completely paralyzed even though significantly weakened. During the General Uprising, any mistake might have caused heavy losses for the revolutionary forces. The betrayal and persistent disobedience of Quan Dương in Hà Đông which led to 47 deaths was the most typical example.

It is obvious that the General Uprising of Vietnamese people under the leadership of the Party and the Việt Minh in the Fall of 1945 occurred in favorable conditions, but it surely did not result from a “power vacuum.” Existing powers, including the Japanese army and the governmental system led by the Trần Trọng Kim Cabinet, to some extent supported by a number of pro-Japanese parties, were able not only to hold on their control but even respond with powerful strikes to prevent the Việt Minh from seizing the power. Thanks to the enormous support of the masses and their commitment and strategies, the Party and the Việt Minh made their move at the right moment and successfully led the nationwide General Uprising.

3. The Power Vacuum Theory Reinterpreted

It is necessary to look at Tønnesson’s concept of “power vacuum” from a different angle. Socio-political power, according to Max Weber, is “a chance for people to impose their will, regardless of any opposition.”¹¹ Political power is therefore not always in the hands of the rulers but can be shared with or shifted to oppositional forces. In reality, in Vietnam from September 1940 to September 1945 there were important divisions and shifts of political power. Before September 1940, supreme power was held by the French colonial regime. After the Japanese army moved in Indochina and Vietnam, the French had to share and transfer part of their political power to them. The Japanese can even be said to have held supreme power in Indochina. On March 9, 1945, the Japanese overthrew the French, becoming the absolute and most important holder of political power. To stabilize their domination, they had to share part of the power with Trần Trọng Kim’s Cabinet.

In that very context, however, new powers came into being and began to get involved in the battle at different levels and scales. They were nationalist and patriotic movements, of which the Việt Minh led

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972), p. 28.

by the Indochinese Communist Party was the most formidable, received the greatest support of the masses, and possessed the biggest organizational structure in terms of scale and scope in both rural and urban areas. More importantly, after March 9th, this force managed to obtain political control in various areas thanks to their gradual efforts. In early June, the Liberation Zone was officially established with its headquarters in Tân Trào. The Việt Minh forces continued to develop rapidly, and by the day the Japanese Emperor surrendered, had already become one of the most powerful forces in Vietnam.

This political reality was well recognized by the two ruling powers at that time, namely the Japanese army and Emperor Bảo Đại as well as the Kim Cabinet. Therefore, these powers had to abide and transfer their power to the Việt Minh. This power transfer was conducted through symbolic yet important and resolute actions, one of which was the August 19 commitment by General Tsuchihashi to stay neutral and nonaligned. This was later confirmed by a telegram sent by the Japanese Ambassador back to Tokyo: “On the 19th, the Ambassador was ‘invited’ to the meeting with the Etsumei’s [Việt Minh] leaders and had a talk with them as they were considered official authorities.”¹² In Saigon, the power transfer was marked by an important though symbolic action: the declaration on August 23rd by Marshal Terauchi before Trần Văn Giàu and Phạm Ngọc Thạch—senior representatives of the Việt Minh—on the non-interventionist stance of the Japanese in the event that the Việt Minh took power. He even offered his personal sword and gun to the Việt Minh representatives as a pledge.¹³ In Huế, the symbol of power transfer was the Declaration of abdication by Bảo Đại (August 25th 1945) and his giving of the sword and royal seal to representatives of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at the Ngọ Môn (Imperial Citadel) on August 30.

The Independence meeting in which President Hồ Chí Minh pronounced his Declaration dated September 2, 1945 marked the end of the transition between existing powers in Vietnam after the August Revolution:

“The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, and Emperor Bảo Đại has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered them and replaced it with an independent Vietnam. Our people at the same time have overthrown the monarchic regime that has reigned supreme for dozens of centuries and replaced it with the present Democratic Republic.”¹⁴

An approach to Vietnamese history from September 1940 to September 1945 from the perspective of political science helps to confirm that in reality there was no “power vacuum” in Vietnam during the

¹² Lê Trọng Nghĩa, “Các Ủy ban nhân dân cách mạng,” p. 94.

¹³ Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 458. According to the (unpublished) memoir of Tran Van Giàu, only Phạm Ngọc Thạch was sent to meet Terauchi and he was given a sword and a gun by him to secure his promise.

¹⁴ Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập* (Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2000), p. 557.

General Uprising that was part of the August Revolution.

Conclusion

The concept “political vacuum” or “power vacuum” proposed by Stein Tønnesson and other Western scholars is merely a form of description of the overall situation in Vietnam after the Japanese coup and the particularly favorable context for Vietnamese people to “use their own strength” to liberate Vietnam through the General Uprising, given that the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies. It would be totally incorrect to consider it a decisive factor that led to the victory of the August Revolution. Two things can be added to illustrate this point:

First, it should be noted that the opportune moment for a take-over of power resulted from the interaction between subjective and objective factors. Objective and exogenous factors alone were not enough to produce such an opportunity. Moreover, however fruitful this opportunity was, had the revolutionary forces been too indecisive, it would have passed and become useless. Suppose that there had been such a “power vacuum” as described by Tønnesson, this “vacuum” would have opened an opportune moment for all three nations in Indochina—Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Yet only in Vietnam did a revolution involving millions of people occur, while in Cambodia and Laos there was no such development. It can thus be argued that it was endogenous factors along with exogenous factors that played a decisive role in the launching and victory of the August Revolution.

Second, during the period from the Japanese coup to mid-August 1945, not only the ICP and the Việt Minh but also Vietnam Nationalist Party and dozens of other parties and religious sects such as the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo joined in the heated quest for power. The objective conditions (which the Western scholars have called “power vacuum”) provided the opportunities for not only the Việt Minh but also the other forces. But in reality, no political forces other than the Việt Minh could seize these opportunities, with some exceptional cases where some members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and other organizations under the umbrella of Chiang Kai-shek’s army could manage to occupy some local areas in Tonkin for a rather short time. This fact proves that only the Việt Minh and the ICP-led organizations grasped the timing and thus were able to gain the final victory.